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Bush bids to bolster air-travel safety

Proposals: soldiers in airports, air marshals, new technology

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Saying he was "returning America's airlines back to the American people," President Bush called yesterday for a wide range of security measures that would include putting National Guard soldiers at every airport security checkpoint and armed air marshals on planes.

"We will not surrender our freedom to travel," Bush told 6,000 cheering airline workers at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. By using highly visible security measures such as stationing the National Guard, he said, "the traveling public will know that we are serious about airline safety in America. "

The president already has posted more sky marshals to try to thwart terrorist hijackings like those that killed thousands on Sept. 11. The government now is going to "dramatically increase" the number of plainclothes marshals on planes, Bush said.

"They'll be like any other passenger," he said. "But Americans will know that there's more of them, and our crews will know there's more of them, and the terrorists will know there's more of them."

The president also wants the federal government to assume authority for airport passenger and baggage checks, although workers at the X-ray screens would still

be employed by private contractors.

Bush will ask Congress for \$500 million in new funds for such things as fortified doors and stronger locks for the flight deck, video monitors to alert pilots to trouble in the passenger section and research into such high-tech devices as aircraft identity beacons that cannot be turned off and systems that will let ground controllers steer an errant jetliner.

The visit to Chicago marked just the second time Bush has journeyed out of Washington since the terrorist attacks, and it was very much a pep rally for America's hard-hit travel industry.

Planes from American Airlines and United Airlines were parked nose to nose with an American flag between them. Bush pointedly mentioned that Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta had flown from Washington to Chicago on a commercial flight, and that today "nine other Cabinet members will board U.S. airlines to fly around our country to do their jobs."

'FLY AND ENJOY'

It is important to restore public confidence in air travel, Bush said. "Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed."

But even as Bush was calling for a return to the air, military officials were describing new "rules of engagement" that would allow a few senior officers to order fighter planes to shoot down passenger jets if they appeared to pose a threat.

The president normally would have to authorize any such attack, but the new rules let high-ranking officers make the call in emergencies.

"If the plane is nose down and threatens the safety and security of the American people, that is the type of situation we're talking about," said Scott McClellan, a White House spokesman.

Mineta is expected to provide more details about Bush's air safety proposals next week, when the House takes up an aviation security bill.

A senior administration official said the National Guard units at airports are a stopgap measure that will be used for four to six months, until regular security officers can be hired and trained.

Between 4,000 and 5,000 troops will be needed to provide security at the nation's 420 commercial airports, at a cost to the government of about \$150 million.

Citing security concerns, government officials refused to say how many new air marshals would be hired, but it is unlikely there would be enough to cover every flight in the country.

BOXER UNHAPPY

That doesn't set well with Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

"Sen. Boxer has called for sky marshals on every flight," said David Sandretti, a spokesman for the senator. "To the extent it falls short, it is inadequate."

The president also is likely to face complaints that he's not going far enough in putting airline security under federal control. Under Bush's plan, the 27,000 airport screeners would work under federal supervision but be hired by private contractors. Many congressional Democrats, as well as a number of local officials, say those workers need to be federal employees.

"I want to see a security system that's seamless, and that means we need to federalize those workers," said Rep. Mike Honda, a San Jose Democrat who is on the House Transportation Committee.

But administration officials suggested it would be easier to fire contract employees than federal workers.

"When you have private contractors, the federal government has much more flexibility in terms of hiring and firing," a senior administration official said. "That actually contributes to safety . . . when (government officials) think safety standards aren't being met."

CALL FOR RESEARCH

Bush's call for research on developing ways for ground controllers to remotely take over hijacked planes was praised by Paul Czysz, professor of aerospace engineering at Saint Louis University.

The technology for remote operation of airliners might be "as simple as a cell phone antenna mounted in the roof of an airplane," Czysz said. The antenna would allow ground controllers to take charge of the plane's computer autopilot, then to fly it to a safe landing.

Bush's proposal is expected to discomfort airline pilots. Last week, a representative of the Air Line Pilots Association ridiculed the idea of giving up any control of an aircraft to people on the ground.

Unresolved The Bush package did not address the following areas:

- Armed pilots: The package does not include a provision, backed by the pilots' union, that would allow pilots to carry weapons.
 - Carry-on: There would be no change in the amount of carry-on luggage for passengers.
 - Financing: Before announcing his proposal, there was talk of a ticket surcharge to pay for the new security measures, but the president did not indicate where the money would come from to pay for the new program.
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Highlights of the airline and airport security plan President Bush announced yesterday:

National Guard: After receiving training in airport security techniques from the Federal Aviation Administration, members of the National Guard would be stationed at airports until regular security officers can be hired and trained.

AT THE AIRPORT

Oversight: The federal government would assume new responsibilities. Security workers would include a combination of federal and nonfederal personnel; federal uniformed employees would manage all operations and maintain a visible presence at all commercial airports:

- Supervising passenger and baggage security at the 420 commercial passenger airports. -- Performing intensive background checks and training and testing screeners and security personnel.
- Patrolling secure areas and monitoring the quality of the airport's access controls.

IN THE AIR

Air marshals Armed plainclothes officers would be assigned to more flights.

The cockpit Doors would be fortified to restrict access during flights.

Surveillance Video cameras would be trained on the cabin.

Flight tracking New transponders that cannot be turned off would allow air traffic controllers to track planes at all times if needed. Bush also wants money to develop technology that would allow planes to be controlled from the ground.

Source: Associated Press, Chronicle news services

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